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# The Peripheral Centre: Writing History on the Western ‘Fringe’<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

1. This contribution has benefitted greatly from comments by an anonymous reviewer and by the editors. I am particularly grateful to Professor Elizabeth Tyler both for specific references, as well as ongoing stimulating discussion.

History-writing has a central place in the rich, extensive literature of medieval Ireland and in depicting their past, learned authors employed their own vernacular creatively and confidently. The biblical and classical frameworks within which they constructed Ireland’s story, as well as their modes of expression reflect those of their European contemporaries, yet this corpus of texts is rarely considered when the writing of history in the early and central Middle Ages is explored. Focussing on narratives in their manuscript context, this article will situate medieval Irish historical writing within the broader Latinate literary culture of which it formed an integral part. In so doing, the intellectual heritage of scholars such as Marianus Scotus whose formative education was in Ireland will be illuminated, and the debt to the Irish strand in their cultural makeup assessed. Moreover, the relative linguistic harmony in Irish learned circles in which Latin and vernacular written media were interwoven in a mutually beneficial embrace can help better inform our understanding of cross-cultural European elite interaction at the time.

## Introduction

2. I have discussed the corpus in greater detail in Ní Mhaonaigh, “Of Bede’s ‘Five Languages and Four Nations’” and “*Légend hÉirenn*.”

Medieval Ireland boasts a rich and varied textual corpus both in Latin and the vernacular from the sixth century.<sup>2</sup> Latin literacy acquired through Christianity was quickly adapted and applied to Old Irish so that a bilingual literate culture flourished down through the early Middle Ages with both Latin and Irish being used in tandem, the vernacular gaining strength from its association with the high prestige language Latin, the language of learning and the Church. As is well known, Ireland is remarkable for the early date with which the vernacular established itself as a written medium in a learned context. Only Anglo-Saxon England bears comparison, vernacular texts from the early seventh century surviving in the two regions. The presence in both Ireland and England of an elite class who cultivated learning has an important bearing on the special place accorded writing from the beginning of the Christian era. In the case of Ireland, its presence outside the Roman Empire – though not entirely removed from it –

3. For a sensitive discussion of the nature of early insular literacy with a focus on Ireland, see Johnston, especially 9–26.

provided an impetus to writing in the vernacular, since the use of Latin had not been as widespread there previously as within the Empire.<sup>3</sup> Creative interaction between the two languages indicates the confidence with which the vernacular came swiftly to be written. The early eighth-century author of a learned text, *Auraicept na nÉces* (The Poets' Primer), places it on a par with the three sacred languages, Latin, Hebrew and Greek (Ahlqvist).

Concern with the nature of language, specifically poetic language, lies at the heart of the *Auraicept*, and its author relates a biblically inspired account of the origins of Irish as part of his discourse. The history of his own language is thus inserted into a universal structure, Irish, like other languages, coming into being at the Tower of Babel, according to this view (Ahlqvist 47–48). In examining how medieval Irish authors presented their past, elucidating their history-writing, the central place of the vernacular is highlighted. What becomes equally obvious, however, is the familiarity of the modes of expression employed in the vernacular, as far as European contemporaries were concerned. Biblical and classical frameworks convey the story of Ireland's history, as will be illustrated in what follows. In focussing on writing history, a literature that is vernacular and European comes into view.

In both their style and variety, texts in the vernacular dating from the seventh century attest to an established tradition of writing in Irish by that date. Old Irish material, that written between c. 700 and c. 900 CE, encompasses poetry, both devotional and secular, and narrative literature, as well as an extensive body of legal tracts, alongside hagiography, martyrologies and other religious texts.<sup>4</sup> Chronicle-writers employed both Latin and Irish with the vernacular being used more frequently as the Old Irish period progressed (see Dumville, "Latin and Irish"). Genealogies were written in Irish, alongside other material presenting diverse aspects of Ireland's past (see Ó Corráin). Writing history was an important part of vernacular literacy from the start.

This material is only sparsely represented in Ireland's earliest manuscripts. Many that have survived have done so because they became part of institutional libraries in continental Europe. In such circumstances, not surprisingly, manuscripts in Latin predominate, though vernacular glosses and commentary, as well as more extended pieces of poetry and prose are also found within their pages.<sup>5</sup> Old Irish material is preserved extensively, however, in manuscripts written in the Middle Irish period (c. 900 to c. 1200 CE).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore,

4. The earliest writing from medieval Ireland is discussed in Ó Cathasaigh, as well as Ní Mhaonaigh, "The Literature of Medieval Ireland."

5. For descriptions of early manuscripts containing vernacular material, see Stokes and Strachan, vol. 1, xiii–xxvi, vol. 2, ix–xl.

6. For a general overview of medieval Irish manuscripts, see O'Neill.

7. One of the most frequently cited lost codices is *Cín Dromma Snechtai* (The Book of Druimm Snechta); for a discussion of the texts it contained, see Carey, “On the Interrelationships.”

8. There is a diplomatic edition of the manuscript: Best and Bergin. Various aspects of it are discussed by the contributors to the volume edited by Ó hUiginn.

9. Duncan, “The Palaeography,” has argued that ‘H’ is likely to represent the work of six separate hands, rather than a single scribe, though this remains debatable; Carey has discussed the contribution of ‘H’ to the manuscript: “H and his World.”

10. Best and Bergin 89 (text) and x–xi (translation and brief discussion). For further discussion of this episode, see Ó Concheanainn 71–72. The manuscript’s later history is discussed in detail by Ó hUiginn, “Lebor na hUidre” and Ó Muraile.

11. “Orait do Moelmhuiri mac Ceileachair mac meic Cuind na mbocht ro scrib ocus ro scrút a lebraib egsamlaib in lebur sa” (“A prayer for Máel Muire son of Célechar, grandson of Conn of the Poor, who wrote and extracted from various books this book”): Best and Bergin 89 (text), x (translation).

12. “Fland tra ocus Eochaid eolach hua Céirín is iat ro thínolsat so a llebraib Eochoda hui Flandacan i nArd Macha ocus a llebraib Manistrech ocus asna lebraib togaib archena [ ... ]” The “excellent books” are subsequently named and something of their history is provided: “namely from the Yellow Book missing from the strong-room at Armagh, and from the Short Book in Monasterboice which the student took in theft across the sea and it has not ever been found after” (“i. asin Libur Budi testo asin carcar i nArd Macha ocus asin Libur Girr boí i mManistir ocus is side ruc in mac legind leis i ngait dar muir ocus ni frith riam di éis”): Best and Bergin 94 (lines 2919–24). For discussion, see Ó Concheanainn 77–78 and Herbert 92–93. I adopt Herbert’s translation of the passage here.

earlier codices, now lost, are sometimes specified as sources by Middle Irish authors who clearly had a wealth of written material upon which to draw.<sup>7</sup> An extensive, expansive array of texts in the vernacular survives from this period in contemporary manuscripts. Deeds of heroes, kings and saints are celebrated. Ireland’s Christian history is recounted in a way that allows accommodation of its pre-Christian past. Surviving manuscripts bear tangible witness to how this was achieved.

## Manuscripts and Scholars

### *Lebor na hUidre* (The Book of the Dun Cow)

The earliest extant vernacular manuscript, *Lebor na hUidre* (The Book of the Dun Cow), was written around the year 1100. It was the product of at least three scribes and is a substantial compilation providing ample evidence for skilful scholarship, as well as for the breadth of subject matter supported by written learned culture at the time.<sup>8</sup> A working book, it was altered and augmented by one or more scribes, whose addition of homilies has given rise to the appellation ‘H.’<sup>9</sup> It was also a treasured book; in the mid-fourteenth century it was acquired as royal ransom for the release of a captive. Its reacquisition by force well over a century later is celebrated in the pages of the manuscript itself in the form of an invocation for the hero who secured its return.<sup>10</sup> Another addition made in the fourteenth century is a prayer for one of the original three scribes, Máel Muire mac Célechair, who died in 1106. According to this, Máel Muire “wrote and extracted from various books this book.”<sup>11</sup> Similar insight into the process of literary production is provided by ‘H,’ a colophon to a particular text noting that “it was Flann and Eochaid the knowledgeable ua Céirín who assembled this from the books of Eochaid ua Flannacáin in Armagh and from the books of Monasterboice, and from other excellent books [ ... ].”<sup>12</sup> The references are to well-known eleventh-century ecclesiastical scholars whose work has survived elsewhere, the most famous of whom was Flann Mainistrech of the monastery of Monasterboice also specified by ‘H.’ Intensive scholarly contacts between that church, the other learned centre mentioned, Armagh, and Clonmacnoise, the monastery in which *Lebor na hUidre* took form, is also suggested by this remark (see further Herbert).

These internal contacts were supplemented by interaction with a wider intellectual milieu. *Lebor na hUidre*, as we have it, opens

13. The Irish version of the text is discussed by Dumville, “The Textual History.” Clancy has suggested that the translation of the text was undertaken in Scotland.

14. *Amra Choluim Chille*, an elegy to Columba, is the third text in the manuscript, as it has survived. A vision text associated with Adomnán is also preserved therein (*Fis Adomnáin*), as is an account of the conversion of a recalcitrant Irish king, Láegaire mac Néill (*Comthóth Lóegairi*) and of a perceptive human-mermaid, Lì Ban, who also became Christian (*Aided Echach meic Maireda* “The Death-tale of Echaid mac Maireda”). The manuscript’s interest in salvation history is discussed by Boyle; and Toner, “History.”

15. The version in *Lebor na hUidre* has been edited and translated by O’Rahilly. An accessible translation based on this and other versions is that of Carson.

16. *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* (The Magical Chariot of Cú Chulainn): Best and Bergin 278–87.

17. *Scél Tuain meic Cairill* (The Story of Túán mac Cairill): Best and Bergin 42–46; see Carey, “Scél Tuáin.”

18. This is further defined as *i nEspáin ocus i nErind* (in Spain and in Ireland): Best and Bergin 305, line 10069.

19. *Cethri Arda in Domain* (The Four Parts of the World): Best and Bergin 305.

20. See Ó Concheanainn 76 and Carey, “The LU Copy.” Commonly known as the Book of Invasions, the title translates literally as “The Book of the Taking(s) of Ireland.” For an insight into this long, extensive narrative, see Carey, *A New Introduction*.

with a fragmentary version of *Sex aetates mundi*, a rendering into Irish of a medieval staple, “The Six Ages of the World” (Ó Cróinín, *The Irish*; Tristram, *Sex aetates mundi*). And in this history of the earth’s nations, the Irish are accorded their place. It is followed by another text surviving only in part, an Irish adaptation of a ninth-century text purporting to relate a history of the Britons, the *Historia Brittonum* (History of the Britons) attributed to Nennius.<sup>13</sup> These and other such compositions share vellum space with narratives of Irish heroes and kings, as well as voyage and vision tales. Moreover, engagement with this diversity of material reflects a common approach. Though no longer fully intact, what the manuscript in fact presents is an expansive history from the time of Noah, via pivotal events of pre-Christian Ireland to the conversion period and on to the time of early saints such as the sixth-century founder of Iona, St Columba (Colum Cille), and his hagiographer, the late seventh-/early eighth-century abbot of Iona, Adomnán.<sup>14</sup> The greater part of *Lebor na hUidre* is concerned with the depiction of figures from the remote past and it contains the earliest extant account of the celebrated composition, *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), a narrative detailing an encounter between the men of the north and west of Ireland (Ulster and Connacht) ostensibly driven by the acquisition of a brown bull.<sup>15</sup> In another narrative concerning Cú Chulainn, the main hero of that tale, St Patrick resurrects him in a demonstration of power designed to make the pagan king, Láegaire mac Néill, believe in God.<sup>16</sup> Other encounters across epochs are less confrontational: Túán mac Cairill who is presented as a recently-baptized character of remarkable longevity conveys knowledge of Ireland’s antediluvian past to a Christian saint, Finnia.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Fintan mac Bóchra, presented as one of three men in Ireland before the Flood, is designated the historian of the western world,<sup>18</sup> alongside two descendants of Noah who preserved the history of the north and south, and a great-grandson of Adam who commanded knowledge of the eastern part.<sup>19</sup> This biblical framework underpins an elaborate history of Ireland, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (The Book of Invasions) which is preserved in other manuscripts but known to have once formed part of *Lebor na hUidre* as well.<sup>20</sup>

*Lebor na hUidre*, therefore, is an exercise in writing history; furthermore it is history of a recognisable kind. Acutely conscious of their own place in a deeper scheme of things, the manuscript’s scribes and the predecessors upon whose work they drew presented their perception (constructed or otherwise) of what had gone before, sit-



21. See McKitterick 9–13, and for a more detailed account of the text, see Gerberding.

22. In a marginal note he states that “I have written this book because of friendship for you [Marianus] and for all *Scoti*, i.e. Irishmen, for I am myself an Irishman” (“scripsi hunc librum caritate tibi et Scotis omnibus .i. Hibernensibus, quia sum ipse Hibernensis”): Ó Cuív, “The Irish Marginalia” 50–51.

23. Mac Carthy; this is an account rather than an edition of the manuscript and it includes texts not from the manuscript itself.

24. The Irish term he uses in connection with his compositional activity is *tinólaid* ‘collects, gathers’: see Herbert 100. In a final flourish at the end of his Chronicle, ingeniously embedded in a series of initial letters in a Latin poem, is the phrase “Moel Brigte clausenair romtinol” (“Máel Brigte, *inclusus*, gathered me [the Book] together”): Ó Cuív, “The Irish Marginalia” 46. This parallels an earlier Latin expression used, “Marianus, *inclusus*, congregavit”: Mac Carthy 9. Clarke has an excellent discussion of this passage in a forthcoming publication, “Merger and Contrast,” of which he has generously provided me with a copy.

uating characters and events in a broader framework, ever mindful of their own place in the overall whole. In this, they adopted an approach familiar throughout Western Europe in the early Middle Ages. Thus in the eighth-century *Liber historiae Francorum*, for example, the Franks are accorded a past within the wider history of the Roman Empire.<sup>21</sup> The concept of God’s chosen people was also highly prevalent and in the image of the Israelites, the portrayal of many medieval communities, including the Irish, was cast (see Garrison). Yet, notwithstanding the fact that Ireland’s prolific authors participated in this common enterprise, they have been relegated to the fringes of learned European historicising culture, with the exception of those who got away.

## Marianus Scotus and Modern Scholars

Among the many scholars who went abroad was Marianus Scotus. An Irish monk who may have been a contemporary of the scribes of *Lebor na hUidre*, Marianus spent much of his adult life in the second half of the eleventh century in ecclesiastical centres at Cologne, Fulda and Mainz. It was in the latter monastery that he produced a universal history in the broad tradition of chronicles by Bede and the earlier fourth-century Chronicle of Jerome. In his adopted homeland, he may have been familiar with history-writing of a similar hue being engaged in by his exact contemporary, Lambert of Hersfeld, as well as with the history of kings and emperors produced by the slightly earlier scholar, Thietmar, Bishop of Merseburg. Yet his earliest intellectual influences were Irish. As Máel Brigte (tonsured one, i.e. devotee, of Brigit), he formed part of learned circles associated with the monastery of Moville (Co. Donegal) which was within the ambit of larger ecclesiastical educational centres such as Bangor and Armagh in the north of Ireland. It was from this formative milieu that he departed for the Continent in 1056 in his late twenties; the books he brought with him suggest he sought to inform in his new environment, as much as to learn. In creating his *Chronicon* which has survived in a contemporary manuscript written in part by an Irish amanuensis,<sup>22</sup> Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 830,<sup>23</sup> he utilised the diversity of material at his disposal, gathering it together, as his fellow scholars were doing at home.<sup>24</sup> Among the prefatory matter is a list of Irish kings, nestling alongside a catalogue of Popes (Mac Carthy 7–8). A form of this Irish king-list may have been among the documents he carried with him from Ireland. That material is also likely

25. The biblical poem in question is edited, Ó Néill, “Airbertach.”

26. His system is explained in detail by Nothaft; I owe this reference to Dr Immo Warntjes.

27. For the continued engagement by the Irish with computistics, see Ó Cróinín, “The Continuity.”

to have included a versified biblical history by an early eleventh-century Irish scholar, Airbertach mac Coisse; three stanzas from this work are quoted in a margin of Marianus’ *Chronicle* (Ó Cuív, “The Irish Marginalia” 54–55).<sup>25</sup> His interest in his insular homeland endured and he continued to receive information about it; the obits of some Irish and Scottish kings who had died after his departure for the Continent are also recorded in his *Chronicle* (Ó Cuív, “The Irish Marginalia” 45). For Máel Brigte *alias* Marianus, and for others like him, the learned activity he practised in ecclesiastical centres abroad resembled that he had practised at home.

Marianus is best known for his complex chronological system in which twenty-two years were added to the length of Christ’s life.<sup>26</sup> He would first have encountered the art of chronography in Ireland whose scholars had been deeply concerned with computistics and the reckoning of time since the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>27</sup> Their interest in the science of time formed part of a wider European phenomenon and Marianus’ continental contemporaries would have provided added impetus to this aspect of his work (Nothaft 479–80). The latter were also influenced by the Irishman’s *Chronicle*, including Sigebert of Gembloux whose own universal *Chronicon* was indebted to Marianus who had come to Mainz during Sigebert’s tenure as archbishop there (Nothaft 461–62). Sigebert’s history came to be highly influential and thus indirectly, as well as directly, Marianus’ work was of major significance for writers of German imperial universal history (see Goetz, “On the Universality” and “Universality”). Its importance also resonated in the insular sphere, Marianus’ *Chronicle* forming the basis of the universal history, *Chronicon ex chronicis*, written by the twelfth-century English historian, John of Worcester, who augmented it considerably with English affairs (see Lawrence-Mathers 256–57).

The centrality of Marianus as an imperial chronicler has long been acknowledged but his debt to the Irish strand of his cultural makeup is generally overlooked. It was in the north of Ireland he first engaged with the basic tenets of an ecclesiastical education in an intellectual context not dissimilar to that of medieval European centres elsewhere. The concepts he went on to cultivate as part of the key contribution he made to universal history writing throughout Europe were also informed by this Irish phase of his learning. The texts in both Latin and the vernacular he brought with him were incorporated into his *Chronicle*, as we have seen, and he remained engaged with insular writing while working in an imperial milieu. The

compilatory activity which, combined with critical appraisal of sources, formed the basis of his chronicle-writing was a core feature of writing history in Ireland, as it was in Carolingian Europe and later (see McKitterick; and Reimitz). In his training and writing, Marianus embodies two sides – Irish and imperial – of a common intellectual heritage. And just as the Irish manifestation of this shared elite culture must be taken into account to understand fully the Irish imperialist's Chronicle, in any exploration of writing history in Ireland in this vibrant era, a broader European cultural heritage has an important part to play.

This heritage needs reiteration, as notwithstanding the wealth of written literature surviving from Ireland in the Middle Ages it is repeatedly deemed “off the mainstream” (see Edel). When treated alongside medieval writing from elsewhere (frequently in a section with its equally ‘deviant’ proto-relation, Welsh literature), its differences are most often discussed. “Celtic literature is archaic in virtually every respect”; its authors “Celtic poets [...] were shamanistic figures”; “Christianity has made little ostensible impact,” much less influences emanating from a centre further east (Tymoczko, “Celtic Literature” 165–66 and see “The Nature”). Literary scholars have neglected it, as “although to a certain extent inspired by Western mainstream literature, [it] quite obviously does not meet its standard” (Edel 24). Modern literary taste may underlie a continued focus in recent general descriptions of this literature on sagas and particular types of poetry, yet medieval Irish literature is implicitly reduced to a fraction of its glorious whole as a result.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, this compartmentalisation does not reflect the approach of medieval author-scribes, as our brief discussion of *Lebor na hUidre* has shown.

28. For an example of this approach, see Ní Bhrolcháin, as noted by Bronner.

## Rawlinson B502 and Rawlinson B503

Nor were the architects of *Lebor na hUidre* in any way exceptional in this regard. The diverse subject matter of that manuscript and the broad learned framework within which texts of all types were juxtaposed and interpreted is similarly a feature of other codices of the time written in Irish. Another twelfth-century slightly larger manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 502, opens in its current form with the vernacular versification of biblical history upon which Marianus Scotus drew. This is followed by a more complete version of *Sex aetates mundi* than has survived in *Lebor na hUidre*. Narratives relating the major life events of pivotal Irish figures span-

29. For a description of the contents of the manuscript, see Ó Cuív, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, 182–200.

ning the pre-Christian and Christian periods follow. A variety of information pertaining to poets, saints and kings is also provided.<sup>29</sup> The specifically Irish matter is implicitly presented as part of wider world history; in a story beginning with creation the Irish are shown to have played a pivotal part.

This is made explicit in another manuscript of this period, bound together with Rawlinson B. 502 ‘proper’ in the seventeenth century, but originally an independent work (Ó Cuív, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, 181–82). Preserved in fragmentary form, it constitutes a version of what is known as the ‘Irish World Chronicle.’ A history of the world based on sources such as Eusebius, Orosius and Bede which were also used by Marianus Scotus and other chroniclers, it accommodates within this wider chronology pre-Christian Irish literary heroes who are thereby assigned a place in a universal scheme. Thus, *Táin Bó Cuailnge* is dated to the year of the birth of Mary, mother of Christ (*Maria mater domini nata est; Slógad Tána bo Cualngi*) and Cú Chulainn’s death is recorded ten years later when Caesar Augustus reigned (Stokes 406–07). A second version of this creative work is preserved in another manuscript of our era. In Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 503, it forms the first part of a southern Irish chronicle, ‘The Annals of Inisfallen’ (Ó Cuív, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, 201–07). Copying from an earlier exemplar, a late-eleventh century scribe reproduced this world history and a chronicle of predominantly Irish affairs down to 1092. It was continued by a series of annalists throughout the Middle Ages ending with the entries for 1450.<sup>30</sup> This is living history, therefore; it is the kind of scholarship in which contemporary authors were actively engaged more broadly. Indicative of that engagement is glossing on the ‘Irish World Chronicle’ text of Rawlinson B. 502 by a number of later scholars, one of whom has been identified as *Lebor na hUidre*’s ‘H’ (see Best, ‘Palaeographical Notes’; and Os-kamp).

30. There is a facsimile edition by Best and Mac Neill. The text was edited and translated by Mac Airt, *The Annals*.

## The Book of Leinster

In their judicious use of glosses and commentary, Irish scribes employed the scholarly apparatus familiar also elsewhere in medieval Europe (see Herbert 89–91). In their application of these explicatory techniques, however, Latin and vernacular interact on the manuscript page, as is evident in the easy code switching between the reference in Latin to the birth of Mary and its synchronisation in Irish with the hosting of the Cattle-Raid of Cooley noted above (Stokes



31. See Clarke, "International Influences" 78–79 and especially his "The *Leabhar Gabhála*" 462–65. For general discussion of the use of the Troy story in this early period, see Innes.

32. The secondary literature is extensive; for surveys of this material, see, for example, Ziolkowski; and Solomon (I owe the latter reference to Professor Michael Clarke).

33. See, for example, Mac Airt, "Middle-Irish Poems." For a general discussion of this genre of poetry, see Smith.

406–07). The two languages are also brought together in the largest surviving manuscript from this era, the Book of Leinster, also known as *Lebor na Núachongbála* (The Book of Oughavall), in which monastery it was once housed (Best, Bergin, O'Brien and O'Sullivan). Written over a number of decades in the second half of the twelfth century, like *Lebor na hUidre* it too is primarily a vernacular tome. However, alongside a longer copy of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* than that surviving in the earlier manuscript is found a skilful adaptation of *De excidio historia Troiae*, a fifth-century account of the Trojan War attributed to Dares Phrygius. This text was of major influence throughout Europe and served as a source for chroniclers and writers of history from the seventh century, as witnessed by the *Chronicle of Fredegar* (Krusch; and Wallace-Hadrill).<sup>31</sup> It inspired literary retellings from at least the twelfth century in both Latin and vernaculars, including a poem in Latin hexameter, *Daretis Frigii Ylias* (The *Iliad* of Dares Phrygius), and a French verse version, *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure (Gomph; Roberts; Constans; Baumgartner and Vieillard).<sup>32</sup> The earliest Irish manifestation of Dares' account predates these, however. *Togail Troí* (The Destruction of Troy), extant in the twelfth-century manuscript, the Book of Leinster, was not the first vernacular adaptation of *De excidio historia Troiae* composed in Ireland; an eleventh-century version is preserved in later manuscripts and there may have been a tenth-century one now lost (see O'Connor 13–15). Within the ambience of the Troy tale in the Book of Leinster, the *Táin* and other accounts of legendary Irish heroes found within the same manuscript tell a more local story but one that in concept and intent may be said to parallel the grand historical narrative of the Trojan war (see Clarke, "An Irish Achilles"; and Poppe and Schlüter). The work of contemporary scholars whose poetry was also recorded in the manuscript reveals a similar approach. In their work which could be described as versified historical syncretising, typological parallels between Irish dynasties and significant world kingships such as the Babylonians and Macedonians are drawn.<sup>33</sup> One of these poets, Flann of Monasterboice, was alluded to in passing in the earlier manuscript *Lebor na hUidre*, as has been noted; he and other named poets, present their record of Irish happenings with a wide-angled lens extending well beyond Ireland itself.

The work of Flann and others cherished in the Book of Leinster formed part of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, an elaborate, influential prosimetric account of the origin of Ireland and her peoples, noted in passing above. It once formed part of the earliest vernacular manu-

34. For discussion, see Carey, “*Lebor Gabála*” and the essays in the volume edited by him, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*.

script, *Lebor na hUidre*, as we have seen, though that version has not been transmitted to us. A copy has been preserved, however, in the Book of Leinster. The self-confident expression which underlies the identification of the wandering of the Irish (*Gáidil*) with the Exodus of the Israelites indicates a mature learned class, skilled in the arts of their scholarly contemporaries elsewhere with whom they were engaged in an active, ongoing dialogue.<sup>34</sup> That interaction manifests itself in a further international strand evident in *Lebor Gabála*, the situation of a nation’s beginnings in the area of the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia, as Michael Clarke has argued. And it was in the context of Carolingian global and national histories that the Irish came into contact with and developed this aspect of their origin legend, as Clarke has shown (“The *Leabhar Gabhála*”). The material continued to evolve and the type of national history preserved therein has been compared in approach and outlook with an historical mythology, *Historia Anglorum*, produced for England by the secular cleric and one time canon of Lincoln, Henry of Huntingdon in the twelfth century (Greenway, *Historia Anglorum*). Indeed *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* was being revised and rewritten as the English historian composed his own account. What links these disparate texts is their focus on “the unity, the identity, the ethnic homogeneity of a people,” as Rees Davies noted (20). Chief among their many differences, however, is the language in which their stories are recorded and thus the audience at whom they are addressed. Henry’s moralistic work had as its patron a bishop of Lincoln though it went on to have very wide appeal (see Greenway, “Authority” and “Henry of Huntingdon”). *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* presented a continuous history of Ireland in the vernacular for a learned and secular elite whose ancestors were accorded biblical forebears. When related as part of Old Testament and Christian history, the story of Ireland and the Irish acquired status and esteem. In the same way, the vernacular itself was granted prestige through its association and interaction with Latin. As will be evident from the preceding, manuscript evidence demonstrates two well-established written media interlocking in a variety of ways in a mutually beneficial embrace.

## Medieval and Modern Scholars

This linguistic harmony, as far as the Irish learned context is concerned, is obscured by the opposition between sacred language and vernacular set up by scholarly models of interpretation which take

35. “Inchoavit et grammaticam patrie sermonis”: Holder-Egger 33; Ganz 38.

36. Thomas Charles-Edwards 591 and n. 27 has noted that John Scottus Eriugena does not appear to have been either a monk or in orders. The question of the type of intellectual training he received in Ireland, therefore, must remain open.

Carolingian literary practice as a widespread norm. Arguably, even in the case of Western Europe’s perceived heartland, this approach may misconstrue the nature of cross-cultural interaction at the Carolingian court itself. The dominant focus on an authoritative, prestige language has rendered it difficult to perceive other conversations of a multilingual hue. According to the prevailing binary view, Carolingian learning with its powerful promotion of Latin and reluctance to use the vernacular shaped the linguistic landscape down to the twelfth century. Yet it is likely that this has the effect of minimising the productive, continuous exchange taking place throughout the early medieval period among scholars who were highly skilled and linguistically dexterous. After all Charlemagne himself is said to have commissioned a grammar of his own language, though if it was produced it has not survived.<sup>35</sup> There is evidence, however, that Carolingians engaged with the vernacular in other intellectual circles, most notably the clerics, Grimbald and John, who were involved in Alfred’s translation of Boethius’ *Pastoral Care*, alongside the king’s Welsh-speaking biographer, Asser (Sweet 7; see Keynes 29). Both Anglo-Saxons and Irish continued to be a presence in European courts, the latter in such numbers that Old Irish must have been a medium of communication between them in some situations at least (Contreni 79–80). Moreover, bilingual and Old Irish glosses in the Latin manuscripts they produced attest to their use of the vernacular in a scholarly context also. One ninth-century bishop of Laon is said to have employed Irish, as well as other vernaculars (*scottica et alia barbara*) amidst his Latin prose (Contreni 81, 88, n. 16). For the most part, however, the output of these exiled Irish scholars was in Latin, including the body of significant work produced by a pair of prominent Irish literary figures, Sedulius Scottus (*fl.* 850) and John Scottus Eriugena (810–77), who were active at the court of Charles the Bald. As in the case of Marianus Scotus some two centuries later, their early education was in Ireland in a period during which the role of the vernacular in scholarship was gaining significance.<sup>36</sup> Irish was certainly not set aside on their arrival in Francia where multilingualism was clearly a feature of the court.

The strong vernacular voice of medieval Irish writing more generally has been acknowledged in modern scholarship but its timbre is deemed too different to allow entry into the medieval literary choir. Thus, for the most part, discussion of written culture in Western Europe has ignored Ireland’s rich evidence or made passing reference to a heritage deemed to be steeped in a pre-Christian, myth-

ological past. That pagan inheritance has coloured the extant literature but in ways which are difficult to measure; moreover it was literate, educated Churchmen who controlled the artistic brush. In this institutional context the encounter with Latin proved invigorating. Modes of discourse were established which lent authority to each of the languages in turn. The concepts and methods involved will be elucidated in the context of our focus on history writing, specific aspects of which will be addressed in what follows.

## Writing History: How and Why?

### Irish History and World History

Irish written culture was undoubtedly historical in focus, as our glimpse at the contents of the primary eleventh- and twelfth-century surviving manuscripts has shown. Access to the past was provided by texts and controlled by their authors. Interpretation of texts was directed by their juxtaposition on the manuscript page. The framework is familiar, constructed out of the raw materials to which medieval scholars more generally had recourse. Among these, the Bible was paramount, as is most evident in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, in which descent of all of Ireland's incomers is claimed from Japheth son of Noah. In his provision of what is termed in another contemporary text, "the certain historical knowledge (*coimgne*) of a fair race,"<sup>37</sup> the author of this enterprising composition had access to historical poems by previous scholars, as noted above.<sup>38</sup> Thus, his approach to historical writing built on that of scholarly predecessors. His own creative input was considerable, however, and the resulting monumental 'history' immediately found favour with the scholarly community, being revised and copied repeatedly in the twelfth century (see Carey, *A New Introduction* 6).

Closely connected with *Lebor Gabála* is *Sex aetates mundi* preserved in two of the earliest vernacular manuscripts, as we have seen. Concerned with a broader remit than *Lebor Gabála*, namely the chronological scheme of the six ages and the universal genealogy of mankind, it provided the wider structure within which the specifically Irish strands of the later work might best be interpreted. Ascribed to an eleventh-century poet, Dublittir ua hUathgaile, in one early manuscript, it is far more likely that he was the author of a related composition, *Rédig dam, a Dé do nim* (Explain for me, heavenly God), as Uáitéar Mac Gearailt has argued. This poem also survives

37. "coimgne cinte cóem-cheneóil": Gwynn, vol. III, 20–21 (line 265).

38. In addition to Flann of Monasterboice (Flann Mainistrech mac Echthigirn, died 1056), already mentioned, these include Gilla Coemáin mac Gilla Shamthainne (died 1072) and Tanaide (died c. 1075) about whom little is known; the poems attributed to them are listed in Carey, *A New Introduction* 5, nn. 11–14.

39. It is edited and translated by Ó Cróinín, *The Irish* 97–108; Ó Cróinín took Dublittir to be the author of both *Rédig dam* and *Sex aetates mundi*.

in the Book of Leinster,<sup>39</sup> and Dublittir practises the same art of historical writing as do the enterprising creator of *Lebor Gabála* and his poetic predecessors. History writing in this period had adopted a particular hue.

That is not to say that bland uniformity prevailed. Another historical text contemporary with *Sex aetates mundi* was *Lebor Bretnach*, the Irish version of the ‘History of the Britons’ (*Historia Brittonum*), and the two texts are contiguous in *Lebor na hUidre*, as already remarked (see Hogan; and van Hamel). The Trojan ancestry accorded to the Britons in the *Historia* is not adopted in *Sex aetates mundi*, however, which makes them part of a biblical scheme. The classical material from which the Troy explanation was ultimately developed constitutes, alongside the Bible, the other main body of matter to which authors in diverse regions had recourse. A strong classicizing tendency is a common feature of eleventh- and twelfth-century European compositions. Henry of Huntingdon’s contemporary, William of Malmesbury, acknowledges it directly stating that he wishes to flavour his work “with Roman salt” (“Romano sale”: Mynors, Thomson and Winterbottom, vol. 1, 14–15; see Campbell 134). It is detectible in the style adopted by other writers of this period, including perhaps the author responsible for the Book of Leinster version of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (see Dilts Swartz). A range of texts relating the classical past were adapted into Irish in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including *De excidio historia Troiae*, as outlined above. This version of the Troy tale and the Irish Aeneid predate their vernacular continental counterparts, the well-known *romans d’antiquité* (see Kruger). Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *roman de Troie* is considerably later than *Togail Troí*, as we have seen.<sup>40</sup> *Imtheachta Aeniasa* (The Wandering of Aenias), a loose prose rendering of Virgil, is closer in date to its French metrical equivalent, *roman d’Enéas*, but nonetheless precedes it by perhaps some fifty or so years (Calder; and Petit). Notwithstanding the assignation of these and other continental texts to the genre of romance, their authors were concerned with the historicity of ‘the Matter of Rome’ (see Green 153–68). The interest of the Irish too was in these works as historical narratives, as has convincingly been shown (Poppe, *A New Introduction*; and Myrick 70–71). As well as providing readily accessible versions of the classics to the learned community in their own right, these adaptations furnished information to medieval scholars who need not necessarily, therefore, have had direct access to classical sources themselves.

40. Clarke, “International Influences,” has argued persuasively that later versions of *Togail Troí* were drawing on international Troy texts, including Benoît.



These include the twelfth-century historical poet, Gilla in Choimdid Ua Cormaic, whose synchronic poem, *A Rí ríchid réidig dam* (King of Heaven, explain for me), drew on *Togail Troí* (Miles 48). Both compositions are also found among the Book of Leinster's pages. The Irish Troy tale was also the source for the sustained comparison between Irish heroes and classical counterparts in a poem of similar date, *Clann olloman uaisle Emna* (Children of Ollam are the Nobles of Emain) (Byrne; see Miles 49–50; and Ní Mhaonaigh, "The Hectors"). In this metrical composition not only is Troilus compared with Cú Chulainn but the *Táin* is specifically equated with Troy ("Alexandair Naíse nertmhar/ – rena néim Troí ocus Táin" ["Powerful Naíse is Alexander – their beauty caused Troy and the *Táin*"]: Byrne 62, 76, stanza 5). Classicization goes further, however, than in the matter of the cause of the encounters (see Poppe and Schlüter 134). The Irish text has been read as a direct parallel to the story of Troy, both narratives seeking in Clarke's words "to arrive at the authoritative version of the events of an ancient war, one pivotal to the Matter of Rome, the other to the Matter of Ireland" ("An Irish Achilles" 244). In this way, the account of the battles between the Ulstermen and the rest of Ireland which constitutes the Irish narrative forms part of an intellectual project which encompassed *Togail Troí*, which the scribe responsible for *Táin Bó Cuailnge* recorded alongside it in the Book of Leinster.<sup>41</sup> The *Táin* was considered to approximate reality and be in that sense historical, as is clear from the starting point of one of two colophons added to his version of the story by the scribe in the Book of Leinster. He would naturally have regarded the text as *historia* (see Toner, "The Ulster Cycle" 8), but as he queried the truth of certain aspects of it, he categorised some parts as *figmenta poetica* which would ordinarily belong to the realm of the implausible, *fabula*. His mastery of medieval rhetoric is evident in his nuanced pondering of the truth value of the tale (see Ó Néill, "The Latin Colophon"). These issues were of concern to his contemporaries in England and elsewhere in Europe also who simultaneously explored the question of truth and falsehood, specifically in relation to Troy and Rome (see Green 134–201).

If the events of the *Táin* and those related elsewhere in medieval Irish narrative material *could* have happened, the attempt to relate them and their protagonists to an actual genealogical and chronological structure is easily understood. Troy provided one such framework to which we will return; the Bible provided another which was creatively utilised by the author of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and other

41. Clarke, "An Irish Achilles" 245, terms it "one of the major intellectual adventures of medieval Ireland: the project of shaping both a narrative and world history [...]."

learned contemporaries. One application of this can be observed in the ‘Irish World Chronicle’ noted in passing above. This text furnished various versions of pre-Christian history and it survives as part of annalistic compilations that traditionally begin with the coming of Christianity with St Patrick in the fifth century. Characters and events from an Irish story world appear alongside biblical figures and significant happenings from world history in the presentation of what aims to be a continuous Christian history. Such synchronisation is also sometimes reflected in the tales themselves. Thus, the crucifixion of Jesus serves as an important chronological marker in many texts. Conchobar mac Nessa, king of the Ulstermen at the time of the *Táin*, is said to have died when news reached him of Christ’s murder (Meyer, *The Death-tales* 2–23). This ultimate warrior-king can be seen to undergo a baptism of blood in death. Moreover, it is in the context of the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection that Ireland’s history (*senchas hÉirend*) is related to the appointed historian (*senchaid*) of the west, Fintan mac Bóchra, according to a tale, *De Shuidigud Tellaig Temra* (Concerning the Settling of the Manor of Tara), preserved only in later manuscripts (Best, “The Settling” 138–89). As Christ died calamitously on the cross, the Irish simultaneously lost their shared knowledge or history (*coimgne*). An authoritative version is provided to Fintan by a giant-like being, Trefhuilngid Treochair, whose mythological appearance is deceptive, since he is described as “God’s angel” (“haingel Dé”) or indeed God himself (“nó fa Día féisin”) in the tale (Best, “The Settling”).<sup>42</sup> As Christ rises, the Irish are reborn through their acquisition of an accepted Christian history and, significantly, one which encompasses all branches of learning. The learned version of the past has acquired a seal of Christian approval. Poems put into the mouth of Fintan mac Bóchra who is accorded a descent from Noah, form part of the Book of Leinster version of *Lebor Gabála*. With the imprimatur of no less than God himself, he can claim with some authority that he can recount accurately “every colonization it [Ireland] has undergone since the beginning of the pleasant world.”<sup>43</sup>

What is apparent, therefore, is that in writing history and constructing an account of Ireland’s past, medieval Irish scholars were concerned with *historia*, as they sought to present plausible history which was – or at least could have been – real. Variety was the hallmark of Ireland’s sanctioned story: “[...] a fis, a forus, a foirceatol, a bág, a breithemnus, a comgne, a comairle, a scéla, a senchasa [...],” (“[...] her knowledge, her foundation, her teaching, her alliance, her

42. The point must have been reinforced by the transparent etymology of his name “Three-branched Upholder.” “Upholder” is used elsewhere of Christ: Mac Airt, “*Filidecht*” 148.

43. “[...] cech gabáil rostob / ó thúis bethad bind”: Best, “The Settling” 128–29.

44. They are thus categorised in one version of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*: Mac Airt, “Filidecht” 145.

45. For discussion of this and the other extant tale-list, see Toner, “Reconstructing.”

46. The term is comprised of *senchas* (history) prefaced by *dind* (a notable place).

47. Among the material used by John of Worcester, for example, to augment the universal chronicle of Marianus Scotus were royal genealogies and episcopal lists; his contemporaries drew on similar sources: see Brett.

48. This term too is a compound of *senchas*, in this instance the ‘history’ of women (*ban* being the gen. pl. form of *ben* ‘woman’). For Gilla Modutu’s literary output, see Murray 158–59.

judgement, her chronicles, her counsels, her stories, her histories [ ... ]”) (Best, “The Settling” 146–47). *Stair*, the vernacular equivalent of *historia*, included *fesa*, *foirbesa*, *togla* (tales of feasting, sieges, destructions) and many other such themes. Categorised as *scéla* (tales) and *coimgneda* (the plural form of *coimgne*, historical knowledge),<sup>44</sup> this material formed the building blocks out of which Ireland’s history was created. Similarly, the list of tale-titles enumerated in the Book of Leinster would have been regarded as referring to plausible historical events and thus a legitimate part of Ireland’s past.<sup>45</sup> Those designated with the task of interpreting these events, of recording history, therefore, should be able to recollect “*coimgneda ocus sceoil ocus senchusa ocus gabala Éirenn*” (“the knowledge, tales, history and invasions of Ireland”) (Mac Airt, “Filidecht” 143, n. 5).

It is in this broader conceptual context that the important collections of place-name material (*dindshenchas*) should be considered, a metrical version of which is preserved in the Book of Leinster.<sup>46</sup> Places formed a key constituent element in the writing of history and the creation of onomastic aetiology formed an important part of the portrayal of Ireland’s landscape of the past. As depictions of specific *loci* might furnish historians with the requisite information, lists of *dramatis personae* might also be required. It is no coincidence, therefore, that numerous regnal lists, as well as genealogical material and catalogues of saints also survive from the eleventh and twelfth century in Ireland, as they do from elsewhere.<sup>47</sup> A text narrating the history of women (*Banshenchas*), primarily as mothers or wives of kings, might have served as a similar resource; it too is found in the Book of Leinster and has been associated with the twelfth-century poet, Gilla Mo Dutu Ua Casaide.<sup>48</sup>

*Senchas*, therefore, of all types, played a key role in the learned culture of eleventh- and twelfth-century Ireland and historiography appears to have been the primary intellectual endeavour of the day. In this too Ireland was not unusual, Susan Reynolds having documented the extent to which historical writing in general, and myths of common descent in particular acquired a new purpose from the tenth century. As stories binding a particular people, they came to epitomise the unity of a group owing loyalty to what was an increasingly powerful leader, contributing to the construction of newly evolving kingdoms in the process (Reynolds). The so-called *ríg co fressabra* (kings with opposition) represent one aspect of an Irish phase of this development, in which eleventh- and twelfth-century

territorial rulers competed with each other for supreme position, claiming to be *rí Érenn* (king of Ireland) or its symbolic equivalent *rí Temra* (king of Tara) in turn. Fostering a kind of ‘corporate’ identity by means of a universal origin myth to which a whole community could ascribe enhanced a shared sense of solidarity. Ambitious rulers turned the conceit of collective ancestry articulated in such texts as *Lebor Gabála Érenn* and authenticated in narratives like *De Shuidigud Tellaig Temra* to their advantage when their place in the political pecking order allowed. Writing this particular brand of history flourished as a medieval industry precisely because aspiring, ambitious rulers had a vested interest in its promotion.

## Textual Culture and Troy

One framework within which Ireland’s version of this type of history was being constructed was biblical, as we have seen. In addition, its creators drew freely on the classical story-world, as noted already, a body of material forming the other main strand of historical writing elsewhere in Europe at the time.<sup>49</sup> The universal popularity of the Troy-legend in particular has also been linked to the changing nature of European nobility, its Virgilian construction of history with an emphasis on genealogy and prophecy providing an increasingly mighty aristocracy with useful tools with which to buttress their power. In Francis Ingledew’s words speaking of Europe more generally, “the production of the Book of Troy was intimately bound to the definition of an aristocratic textual culture” (669). Moreover, its conception of history was secular and provided a useful contrast with the Augustinian alternative “that construed the human condition as a state of pilgrimage and exile and that made the heavenly city or patria each person’s proper goal” (Ingledew 676). When the earliest extant version of the Troy tale was written in Ireland, a vernacular reworking of Dares’ *De excidio Troiae* of tenth- or eleventh-century date, secular nobility and clerical scholars were intimately intertwined. They continued to be so for some time, as indicated by the presence of a later version of *Togail Troí* in a thoroughly monastic codex, the Book of Leinster. Thus, the dual strategy of genealogical depiction of the past and firm prediction of the future which served to legitimise aristocratic power was affected in Ireland in an ecclesiastical milieu. Close connections between clerics and the ruling classes similarly underlie Troy retellings elsewhere: a particularly influential example, *Historia regum Britanniae*, was composed by a secu-

49. For discussion see, for example, Southern; and Wolf. There is an overview of the European classical material in Ziolkowski; the Irish material is surveyed in O’Connor.

lar cleric, Geoffrey of Monmouth, who himself had Anglo-Norman links. Yet as a secular cleric, Geoffrey was of a different breed whose cultural centre was a royal court rather than a monastery. His story of Britain's Trojan origins may have been cast in Latin but it was the product of an increasingly secularised age.

The engagement of medieval Irish scholars with the story of Troy, while both detailed and deep, did not extend to acquisition of classical ancestry, however, unlike their British neighbours or Normans (and others) further afield. In this they resembled the Anglo-Saxons who quite deliberately eschewed descent from Troy, as Elizabeth Tyler has shown. Neither people was conquered by the Romans which may explain in part their mutual avoidance of Trojan origins (Tyler, "Trojans" 3). What is clear, however, is that their eschewal of a Trojan connection was a conscious intellectual choice (see Tyler, "Trojans" and Clarke, "The *Leabhar Gabhála*" 466–68). Both groups drew abundantly on Troy material in other contexts; the work of Dares Phrygius was translated early into Middle Irish, as already noted. Roughly contemporary with the Old English translation of Orosius' *Historiae adversus paganos* (History against the Pagans) which was written in the late ninth or early tenth century and presented a late antique view of Graeco-Roman history, was an Irish retelling of the career of Alexander the Great (*Scéla Alaxandair* [The Tidings of Alexander]), drawing partly on the same Orosian text (see Peters; and Meyer, "Die Geschichte").<sup>50</sup> In this tenth-century learned milieu, knowledge of the *Aeneid* can be assumed, although the earliest extant Irish adaptation of Virgil, *Imtheachta Aeniasa* (The Wanderings of Aeneas), is a century or so later, as noted above. Virgilian commentaries serve as important sources in this period, suggesting intensive study of the text.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, their extensive usage provides valuable evidence for the learned, scholarly, explicatory context in which translation of classical matter took form.

It was a context in which both clerical and lay audiences functioned, as the increasing use of Middle Irish, and to a lesser extent Old English, to communicate these classical stories reveals. They served as a broader framework against which local political issues and more immediate concerns were cast into sharp relief. In the course of a sensitive close reading of two eleventh-century English narratives, *Encomium Emmae reginae* and the *Life of Edward the Confessor*, Tyler has shown how for their continental authors and courtly patrons, Troy shaped contemporary political discourse and was central to an exploration of the concepts of history and truth ("Tro-

50. The English and Irish vernacular texts are compared by Tristram, "Der insulare Alexander." For the Old English Orosius, see Bately, *The Old English Orosius*; for discussion of date, see lxxxvi–xciii and her article, "The Old English Orosius." The use to which the text of Orosius was put in eleventh-century England, as argued persuasively in Tyler, "Writing," is highly relevant for the theme explored here. (I am grateful to Professor Tyler for providing me with a copy of this article prior to publication).

51. For examples, see Ní Mhaonaigh, "'The Metaphorical Hector'" 152–53 and Miles 60. Knowledge of the *Aeneid* in England at this time, and of Servius' commentary of it, is discussed by Tyler, "Trojans" 8–9.



jans”). On the other side of the Irish Sea, another group of deliberate non-Trojans exploited the same story-world to elucidate their own experiences in broadly similar though subtly different ways.

By way of example, we may cite a work of political propaganda, *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh* (The War of the Irish against Foreigners [Vikings]) written sometime after the *Encomium* and *Life of Edward* in the opening years of the twelfth century. Ending in a pivotal battle between the forces of King Brian Boru (Brían Bórama) of Munster and a combined host of Leinstermen, the Norse of Dublin and Scandinavian allies from overseas, the learned author included frequent allusions to the Graeco-Roman past in his portrayal of an historical encounter which had taken place near Dublin in 1014 and which assumed key significance for the powerful dynasty claiming descent from Brian. In a climactic passage in the text, the latter son’s, Murchad, the *de facto* battle-leader, is compared carefully and skillfully with Hector. This is no mere heroic equivalence, however, and the superiority of the classical warrior is extolled. By placing both heroes as beginning and end points in a complex chronology based on the ecclesiastical scheme of the ‘Six Ages of the World,’ the cross-cultural comparison assumes added importance, according Murchad his proper place on a world-historical stage. Employing the learned motif of *senectus mundi* (the ageing world), Murchad’s valour must of necessity be less than that of Hector who flourished in an earlier age when the world was in its youth. Yet both represent the pinnacle of heroism in their own allotted time (see Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Metaphorical Hector”). As a defining comparator, Troy was accorded a fixed point on a universal timeline, one with which a foundational, prehistoric Irish battle, *Cath Maige Tuired* (The Battle of Mag Tuired), was crucially synchronised (“úair is a n-áonaimsir rogníadh cath Muigi Tuired ocus togail Traoi” [“for the battle of Mag Tuired and the destruction of Troy occurred at the same time”]: Gray 40–01, §69). As interpretative tool, Troy was effective, since contemporary events were related precisely to it in both space and time.

In this context, the fate of Hector and the Trojans might well have been read as resonant of that of Murchad, his father Brian, and their allies at the Battle of Clontarf. Defeated in battle like the fallen heroes of Troy, the Munstermen and their supporters ultimately triumph through the supremacy of their descendants. As learned authors utilised the Troy material to comment perceptively on aspects of eleventh-century English court life, as Tyler has shown in her analysis of the *Encomium* and Edward the Confessor’s *Life* (“Trojans” and

Tyler, *England in Europe*), so too did their Irish counterparts draw on their detailed knowledge of classical narratives to provide a nuanced reading of developments in their own time. Latinate learning, whether expressed in the predominantly vernacular voice of the Irish material or in Latin, informed the world-view of the ruling elite. Moreover in their extensive use of a range of European texts, of which the Troy material is merely exemplary, insular scholars demonstrate their awareness of current trends. The sophistication with which external ideas are invigorated through cross-cultural interplay of the type evident in the texts discussed above reveals a confidence born of a highly-developed written tradition and one in which for both England and Ireland the vernacular had for long played a key, and from a wider European perspective, distinctive, part.

## Conclusion

In the case of Ireland in particular, the vibrant role of the vernacular has contributed to its marginalisation by modern scholars on the medieval European literary stage. Its early manuscripts have been mistakenly viewed predominantly as repositories of native myth; the involvement of their scribes in an international, intellectual endeavour has been continually downplayed. The main hand in *Lebor na hUidre*, however, responsible for our earliest extant versions of Old and Middle Irish narratives, including *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, is also attested in a Latin manuscript of Boethius' *De re arithmetica*, a core component of the medieval curriculum (see Duncan, "Lebor na hUidre"). There is also evidence for extensive study and glossing of Boethius in the twelfth century in the monastery of Glendalough where another vernacular codex discussed above, Rawlinson B 502, may have been compiled about the same time (see Ó Néill, "Irish Glosses"). Vernacular renditions of classical texts, such as the copy of *Togail Troí* contained in a third contemporary manuscript, the Book of Leinster, display intense engagement with both Latin source and commentary. In the same way, extensive use of biblical and other ecclesiastical material displays the skill and sophistication and playfulness that only deep understanding of a Latinate, learned culture can bring. Texts and tenets central to the thought processes of medieval Europe's educated and elite were moulded and modified by Irish scholars, as they were by authors not deemed peripheral in any way. Re-

thinking medieval western literature will involve both perceived marginal and middle occupying the same central space.

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